‘I want to keep up with the younger generation’ - older adults and the web: a generational divide or generational collide?

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Abstract

This paper considers the social significance of digital technologies in older adults’ lives by exploring the impact the web has on their lived experiences. The study of digital literacies and digital cultures is mostly focused on youth, thus paying limited attention to older adults’ engagement with the web.

With this paper we aim to contribute to under-theorised debates of older adults’ digital experiences beyond generalisations of generational and/or digital divides. Focus groups interviews with older adults enrolled insessions on digital literacies were used to get insight into this cohort’s online experiences.

The findings revealed that older adults’ key motivation to become digitally literate was driven by a desire of remaining relevant in a contemporary world, in other words, of cultivating their identity as active citizens in a digital society.

We offer considerations and reflections on the findings through the application of the works of Karl Mannheim to the phenomenon investigated.

Keywords: Digital accessibility, Digital practices, generations, Karl Mannheim, older adults, The web.

Introduction

The emergence of digital technologies, particularly the web, has come to transform economies, societies and practices. A major factor of this transformation is related to the proliferation of internet access, which in western societies has reportedly reached almost 90% of the population. Even though the widespread use of the internet is not as intense in developing countries as it is in developed ones, the increased use of mobile broadband in less affluent nations has meant that online communication has become a global phenomenon that implicates not only different socio-economic groups, but also different generations.

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The emergence of the web as an interactive platform without geographical borders opens up a new world of information, communication and participation to a wide range of individuals. It also raises a set of questions regarding the opportunities and risks presented on the web. Although digital technological innovations are being embraced by younger and older generations alike, both show different needs regarding their understanding and use of digital devices and the platforms that can be accessed through it (Comunello et al., 2017).

Studies on digital technologies have been mainly focused on the experiences of young people given popular generalisations of digital practices as intrinsically linked to youth. This has led to popularisation of phrases such as 'digital natives' or 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001) that fallaciously link youth to digital proficiency. However, the 21st century is marked by the pervasiveness of digital technologies, especially the web, in people's work and social lives. Thus the digital phenomenon is not one that only affects and implicates young people, even though an obvious link is often made with this group. Rather, the impact of digital technology on people's practices is felt right across different generations as it is directly and indirectly implicated on the different facets of people's lives through increasingly common practices such as banking, shopping and news reading, to name a few day to day activities.

Borrowing from Mannheim's (1952) seminal work on the sociology of generations, we explore older generations' digital practices 'as a particular type of social location' (p. 291) that can be explained in relation to social, cultural and economic conditions and in which thought and experiences are shaped by historically relevant contexts.

In so doing, this paper explores the social and historical significance of digital technology in older adults' lives by considering the impact the web has on their lived experiences. More precisely, we are interested in understanding what motivates research participants' use of digital technologies and what difficulties they encounter in their interaction with the digital world.

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This introduction is followed by a review of research discussing the use of digital technologies by older adults. Next, the methodology underpinning the study is discussed. The analysis of the research data are then presented and a discussion of the findings provided.

Older adults and the web

Although the web as a means of social connection is popularly associated with the activity of young people, its pervasiveness in the workplace and day-to-day activity has meant that, in one way or another, it has also imposed itself on the practices of different age groups, including older citizens. To be more concrete, the rapid developments of the web from a read to a read/write/publish platform have transformed the way individuals live, work and learn (JISC, 2014) and paved the way to different forms of digital participation (Jenkins et al., 2009) that require both technical mastery as well as an understanding of the cultural and social conventions that are emerging online (Author1, 2017). In other words, the advent of the web has changed the history of communication and everyday life in a rather permanent way (Naughton, 2012).

The possibilities enabled by the web in recent decades have had an increasing impact on the nature of interactions and communication channels used amongst individuals. The widespread use of online platforms by businesses and services has been a testimony of that impact, one that has led to the realisation that such technological advancements, as important as they may be in supporting innovation and society, can create barriers of engagement for those who feel less apt to harness the possibilities provided by digital technologies. Issues regarding digital inequalities are therefore a growing concern of national and international governments and organisations who regard the discrepancy of digital use by different groups an important issue to tackle. Such realisation shifts the focus of digital divide debates from technology access to digital accessibility. The emphasis is no longer just on the development of appropriate and affordable digital infrastructures, but also on the effective use of technology. Digital inequalities are closely interlinked with classic understandings of social inequalities in that the amount and quality of capitals an

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individual has on their disposal arguably shapes their experiences. Digital accessibility thus can be understood as the practices and experiences citizens conduct online (Author 1 and Author 2, 2017). Inherent to it is the need to foster individuals' digital literacies in order to equip citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds with the appropriate knowledge and know-how to engage online.

As such, the understanding of digital literacies has also evolved with the development of digital practices that currently pervade the web. Although researchers have not yet found consensus regarding a single definition of digital literacies, digital literacies can be broadly defined as a set of technical as well as social and cultural practices required to engage in a knowledge society that is highly influenced by digital technologies (Author1, 2017). Equipping individuals with a given set of skills or competences on how to use a given digital device is then only one minor aspect of digital literacies. Digital literacies, just like traditional literacy practices, are not an autonomous entity (see Lankshear and Knobel, 2015) and require a careful consideration of the social and cultural milieu in which individuals are inserted as well as the contexts in which such practices are placed. Thus, not being digitally literate in the contemporary world is increasingly becoming a factor of social exclusion.

Alongside economic and geographical differences (rural vs urban), age has been a considerable determinant in studies of digital exclusion. Yet, the way age has been introduced in debates relating to digital technologies has not always helped cast a critical eye on the issues that underpin generational practices. For example, terms such as 'digital natives' or 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001) do not provide us with a framework to understand how different generations are influenced by digital technology. Rather such terms encourage the 'reproduction of age bias at its most basic level' (Costa and Harris, 2017) by conveying over simplistic assumptions of the digital abilities of different age groups. Such generalizations can be detrimental to how the general public conceives present and future digital practices of active citizens of different age cohorts. What is more, such deterministic conceptions are becoming engrained in our collective perspective due to its popularisation via media taglines that in turn influence practitioners and policy makers (Helpster and Eynon, 2010). This in itself may show an unconscious bias towards

those whom the public may assume the majority of the 'digital population' to be. However, given that Europe's older population is a demographic phenomenon on the rise, this perception is likely to change in the years to come as it becomes even more crucial to understand how older generations are using the web, what their needs are and what literacies they require so that their online presence and participation is both effective and appropriate.

Research has often suggested that older adults are more likely to show indifference towards the web given their unfamiliarity with the online world and the possibilities it can offer (Selwyn et al., 2003). The lower use of technology by older adults has also been linked with feelings of distrust for a medium unknown (Gatto and Tak, 2008). There is alsoa cultural and social gap when it comes to digital practices, one that is likely to continue to shape experiences of technology, especially if appropriate support and training is not put in place (Friemel, 2014).

Important to note here then is the realisation that we need to move beyond basic perspectives of users' access to technology (see, for example, Hargittai et al., 2018) to focus on users' digital activities within their specific socio-cultural and economic context. These are classic, yet critical factors worth considering when studying individuals' practices, in particular an individual's socio-cultural and economic background. In this regard, a growing body of research has started to show that when it comes to their digital practices older adults should not be treated as a homogenous group (see, for example, van Boekel et al., 2017). Rather, their activity should be situated within their specific contexts of practice. As such it is important to devise an understanding of generational practices that is not solely or mostly reliant on age differences.

A sociological perspective of generations:

Karl Mannheim's generational theory provides a useful and original contribution to the conceptualisation of older adults' engagement with digital technologies precisely because his theory does not use age as the only fundamental point of distinction of a generation. In fact, Mannheim (1927) urges us to conceptualise 'generation as a particular

type of social location' (p. 291). Moreover, by drawing on Dilthey's work, Mannheim suggests that the understanding of generations cannot be done merely in a quantitative way. Rather, a thorough understanding of the problematic of generations relies on a qualitative understanding of an individual's temporal inner lived experience[1] or *qualitativ erfaßbarer innerer Erlebniszeit* (see Mannheim, 1927/2017, p.86). This is a key aspect to bear in mind when conceptualising the digital practices of different generations, and one that puts claims of age as generational divides to rest. A second argument in this direction relates to the observation that generations more than relating to a chronological time are connected to a deeper phenomenon, that of 'simultaneity', i.e., shared co-existence i.e, *Phänomen der Gleichzeitigkeit,* (See Mannheim*,* 1927/2017, p.86). Mannheim justifies this assertion by stating that:

> the phenomenon of generations is that not merely (…) the succession of one after another (…) but also that their *co-existence* is of more than mere chronological significance. The same dominant influences deriving from the prevailing intellectual, social, and political circumstances are experienced by contemporary individuals, both in their early, formative, and in their later years. They are contemporaries, they constitute one generation, just because they are subject to common influences. (Mannheim, 1927, p. 282).

In this regard, Mannheim's theory focuses on the influence and impact of (contemporary) history on cohort groups. For Mannheim (1927) a generation must be understood as a complex set of social interconnections situated in a given historical period. Generations thus share not only similar biological rhythms, but also 'a particular kind of identity of location (…) [that] is determined by the way in which certain patterns of experience and thought tend to be bought into existence' (ibid, p.292) through practice. In other words, the social and historical positioning of an individual plays a key factor in determining the generation they belong to. In a time in which digital technologies have come to predominate our day to day activity, labelling young people as the digital generation is thus to deny older generations their role in a so called digital society.

[1] The English translation of Mannheim's work on Generations seem to omit this crucial idea of 'inner experience time'. As such, we drew on the original text to create our argument.

In this vein, national and international governments have been showing their support for the upskilling of a society gone digital through relevant policies that aim to raise awareness of the importance of the web in a global society as well as to equip older citizens with the adequate skills and knowledge to take part in a digital economy. A strong example of this is the work the European Union has been doing in this regards with initiatives such as the Digital Agenda for Europe and the Europe 2020 strategy (see Author 1, 2019). Such initiatives emphasise digital practices as a key component of an individual's active citizenship life and highlight the web as an essential communication platform where personal and public interests intersect through the offering of services and business as well as opportunities to socialise. It is in the context of debunking generational divides and trying to understand the digital experiences of older adults that this study took place. More concretely, we set out to explore the motivations behind research participants' use of digital technologies and examine the difficulties they encounter in their interaction with the digital world.

The study

The study presented in this paper focuses on a cohort of twenty-one 60+ year old adults engaged in developing both their technical and cultural knowledge of digital technologiesthrough their participation in training sessions on digital literacies that were offered in a centre for adult learners in the UK. All participants enrolled in the sessions on their own accord and participated in the research component of the project on a volunteer basis.

The research project took on a qualitative approach as the researchers were interested in accessing and interpreting the phenomenon under focus '(…)in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). Research data was collected through focus groups discussions that were audio recorded with the permission of participants and later transcribed. Three focus groups were conducted. Each focus group accommodated between five and eight research participants. The choice for a focus group approach was

determined by the realisation that it is a dialogical technique that allows participants to interact with one another about a topic they have in common. Such an approach enabled the researchers to gather information in a more natural setting, and set the context for the interactions and sharing of perspectives with regards to the participants' online experiences. Focus groups is a useful technique of data collection when researchers need to gather a large amount of information in a short amount of time (Morgan, 1996). They are also a valuable way of drawing upon participants' attitudes, reactions and perceptions through the reflection of individuals' practices and their personal and collective experiences (Denzin, 2008).

The focus group sessions followed a pattern of dialogue with researchers initially setting the tone of the conversation by evoking participants' experiences with the web. This allowed participants to engage in the topics without strict direction from the researchers, who only contributed to the discussion when the conversation started to go off-topic as a form of bringing them back to the scope of the study, or when we thought it was important to go deeper into some of the aspects on which the collective narrative touched but which perception or idea was left underdeveloped. This informal set up offered the researchers opportunities to observe how participants constructed and negotiated meaning (Liamputtong, 2011).

The interview guide for the focus groups centred on 3 key aspects related to aim of exploring participants' experiences of digital technologies through Mannheim's conceptualisation of generations. In this sense, we developed an interview guide that gauged:

- The meaning participants attributed to contemporary digital technologies and inherent practices
- Participants' place within the digital world (including their shared co-existence with other cohorts (*Phänomen der Gleichzeitigkeit,* Mannheim, 1927/2017*)* and socio-cultural location, and
- Participants' temporal inner lived experience (*innerer Erlebniszeit,* Mannheim, 1927/2017) in the context of a digital society.

Field notes were also taken by the researchers both during and right after the focus group interviews took place. The field notes served to record research participants' reactions to the topics discussed and to remember points of discussion that could signpost the analysis of the research (Krueger, 1997).

The focus group sessions were transcribed and coded taking a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns as well as inconsistencies amongst the ideas expressed in the discussions and across the different focus groups. Different readings of the transcriptions were conducted with the purpose of identifying both explicit and implicit themes from the data collected (Guest et al, 2011) as relevant themes for the research project.

Below we present the findings derived from this analysis in relation to the focus of this paper.

Findings

The data collected for this study brought to the fore two key findings. First, the data showed that participants' endeavours to seeking training and becoming digitally literate derived from their desire to be independent web users, i.e., someone who can use the web on their own. The inquiry also revealed that this struggle for digital autonomy came at a price of often feeling anxious about the fast and ever changing pace of the digital world, a realisation that nevertheless did not outweigh participants' perceptions of the benefits of being online and which further reassured participants of their engagement with the web as a lifelong learning pursuit.

The need to be digitally autonomous

Research participants in all three focus groups were unanimous about their desire to develop knowledge about the web. A key reason for seeking training about digital literacies related to the objective of wanting to be relevant in society and take part in what they described as a 'modern world'. The quote-examples below illustrate this aspect well:

> *I want to keep up with the younger generation* (FG1, RP5)
>
> *If you don't get involved [on the web] then you miss out*. (FG2, RP1)
>
> *[I want] to be part of the world around us rather than sitting and thinking "what are they talking about?" …It is very difficult to operate in this world if you don't have any knowledge of technology* (FG2, RP3)

Keeping up with the developments of the web - 'a digital transformation that will not stop' (FG2, RP6) - was therefore an important reason for participants' investment in learning how to engage online. This was further explained by their desire to keep in touch with family:

> *Because families are spread all over the world these days, the internet is essential* (FG2, RP7)

The use of digital technologies was also driven by the realisation of the effects of globalisation and increased work mobility that lead to geographical distances between research participants and family members and friends (Genner and Süss, 2017), a distance that technology can mediate:

> *To be able to keep in touch and view family and friend's photographs on Facebook [as a form being part of their experience]* (FG1, RP3)

This requires knowledge and confidence of how to participate in different communication platforms that family members use

> *My family are also using Facebook, and skype and Instagram, and I actually felt a bit embarrassed because being born prior to the digital age … I felt a bit embarrassed or seeing my kids doing things I had no knowledge of* (FG2, RP4)

It could thus be said that participants strived to be part of 'modern life' (FG1, RP2) where digital technology, especially the web, plays a crucial role as a form of contact. Family has

been known to be an obvious reason and driver for digital engagement by older adults (Tsai et al., 2011) as the web, through its social platforms, can offer an immediate channel of social interaction and easy access to loved ones.

Perhaps more interesting for this research, however, are participants observations of the web as a conduit to learning, which in their own words was described as a form of 'keeping active' (FG3, RP5) and 'intellectually engaged' (FG2, RP6) through the possibilities the web offers for interaction with information and learning. The contemporary society has often been framed with regards to a knowledge economy that is increasingly reliant on the digital as both a space of circulation of information and production of new knowledge (see, for example, Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). However, keeping active and being a participant in online spaces has more often been linked to young people's practices than older people's attitudes towards the web. In this regard, the use of MOOCs and Google Scholar were offered as examples of how some of the participants characterised their engagement with contemporary forms of learning as they sought to extend their digital skills beyond what they regarded as basic competences in order to be able to use the web for 'more than just email' (FG3, RP1):

> *The benefit of working and understanding it (technology) … for example, google scholar…if you're looking for something medical… you get far more information*. (FG2, RP4)

Moreover, participants also claimed that digital technology 'opens up the world for you [them]' (FG2, RP3) as they give the example of being housebound because of weather conditions:

> *If you are house bound…because of ice… it's essential as you can do your shopping online, keep in touch with people…. So it's [the web] essential* (FG2, RP2)

One participant elaborated further on this perception by stating that:

> *I know that [in the winter] I will be confined to my flat regularly… and will use those days to look up information on the internet… do my Future Learning stuff [MOOC Courses] (…) and it means that psychologically I will not feel I am shut down because of the weather* (FG2, RP6)

This was confirmed by another participant who said:

> *You can find yourself socially isolated [if you're not online] (FG2, RP5)*

This is a curious aspect to explore in that participants regarded the web as a tool of socialisation capable of evading feelings of isolation when physical connection is not possible. Through their study, Fokkema and Knipscheer (2007) posit that older adults' feelings of loneliness can be lessened through the fostering of digital connections. The participants in this study seem to confirm this aspect. Moreover, they also regard the web as a source of knowledge and learning that allows them to escape boredom through engagement in free learning activities that interest them. This is not exactly a surprise given that recent research has indicated that subscriptions to MOOC are dominated by older adults (Howarth et al., 2016), although the description of older adults is broader than a cohort of 60+ year old individuals on which our study focus. Nonetheless, the realisation that such courses can be a source of engagement for retired populations is an interesting finding in that it indicates that MOOCs more than a source of learning can be regarded as a vehicle of integration and development of older adults' digital practices.

Participants' ambition of being part of a digital society and of making the web a useful instrument of communication and socialisation is also reflected by the felt need to demystify technology as something that was not part of their past, but which has a strong presence in their present and future practices:

> *Before attending the sessions [at the centre], technology was a kind of mystery to me* (FG2, RP2)

Their engagement with the digital is also a strategy devised not to lose touch with younger generations:

> *children are learning how to use technology in nursery… and I decided I had to catch up with it, otherwise I will always be lagging behind…because it [technology] moves so fast* (FG2, RP7)

It is equally a way of remaining relevant in a mediated world:

> *The speed with the way things are moving … you need to keep up with the pace of technology and understand how it integrates with my lifestyle* (FG2, RP6)

Such desire to be an active participant in a digital society however comes at a price, that of constantly being challenged by the ever forming norms of the web. So is the nature of a world that is in constant transformation:

> *We require regular updates…otherwise we will always be trying to catch up* (FG3, RP5)

The online world marks a clash with participants' past knowledge practices where the dynamics of interaction were restricted to geography and face to face presence. There is therefore a sense of 'lost control' on the web as a social space that continues to expand and where the social conventions that permeate the digital world are not yet completely embodied in their own practices. This makes participants want to develop an appropriate conduct online regarding the awareness of public and private aspects of the web so that they can make informed choices about where to participate, and how and when to engage online:

> *Not knowing exactly how to use the technology was scary… all of these friend requests and not understanding privacy (…).* (FG2, RP4)

> *[I need to] learn more about privacy and security …. I still need to learn about online banking.* (FG3, RP1)

This highlights that participants are conscious of the gaps in their knowledge regarding digital participation and digital practices in general. Such knowledge gaps have been highlighted in research as an obstacle to digital inclusion of older adults (see, for example, Schreuers et al., 2017). This, however, does not seem to deter the participants in this study.

It rather impels them to actively look for solutions to overcome the gaps in their knowledge and digital experiences. An example of this is their enrolment in the digital literacies sessions offered by the centre for adult learning from where the participants were recruited to take part in this research. Nonetheless, their online engagement does not come without reservations which is evidenced by the apprehension that participants show about being active online, as explored in the sub-section below.

Digitally anxious but hopeful of the future

Although participants showed a very positive outlook towards the web as 'the space to be' and where they can congregate and communicate with different generations and different groups of people that are core to their socialisation, they also showed some concern about the changing nature of the web and digital technologies, something that contrasts with their offline experiences. For example, participants reported feeling vulnerable for not having access to the support networks that were in place in their workplace. Coping with the advancements of technology and a fast paced digital world has become more difficult to deal with since participants entered retirement. This is so because of the lack of support they were accustomed to and which was provided by their professional communities:

> *Before retirement, when you are working in a busy environment with a lot of colleagues there are a lot of people around you to ask for help. However when you retire there is often no-one to ask so you need to learn to be able to access IT and social media by yourself* (FG1, RP4)

There is also the realisation that the digital learning needs of older adults are often overlooked as part of local lifelong learning provision:

> *Councils and local courses don't really account for the [digital learning] needs of older people* (FG3, RP5)

This is further aggravated by concerns of not knowing how to correctly deal with software updates or examples of digital scams that are often reported on the news:

> *[I am not always sure] how confidential [private] online tool are and would like to know how to make my information more secure* (FG1, RP1)

Despite these concerns participants seemed encouraged to pursue with the exploration of their digital practices, because they aimed to overcome their concerns by gaining appropriate knowledge. They also felt that being digital literate was a pre-requisite to being engaged in contemporary practices. When asked about imagining a future without the web, participants instinctively claimed they could not. As they further reflected on this question, they discussed that although they had previously lived without the benefits of the internet and the web for a larger amount of time than they have lived in the presence of it, they admitted they would find it difficult to give up on the commodities that the web has come to offer them. Participants provided the following as an example:

> *I cannot imagine life without the web. (…) We've been on a holiday recently and we couldn't get the internet easily… and it was quite fun because I heard a 16th year old say to her mum 'this place is terrible. It doesn't have wifi'… and I thought to myself: I feel exactly the same as this girl. Now every time I book a hotel, I check it has a wifi connection. I no longer can imagine my life without it.* (FG2, RP5)

This idea was further confirmed by the following statement:

> *I could probably live without it [the web] but I don't want to try it. I lived without it for 2 weeks [on holidays] and I don't want to try it again (FG2, RP5)*

Another participant justified her position about the need to be online with family needs:

> *Because families are spread all over the world these days, the internet is essential* (FG3, RP1)

Whereas another participant evoked the need to keep up with contemporary practices:

> *Digital technology is here and won't go away. The older we get, the more we will have to use it. Online shopping, online banking. It's the norm for the young generations. So we really need to get up to speed with it* (FG3, RP1)

As researchers we were intrigued by the positive outlook that participants generally had of the web as well as their enthusiasm for digital participation, a curiosity that had already started with the high demand for the digital literacies sessions. Given that research

participants' recruitment was based on their participation in the training sessions on digital literacies that were offered by the Centre, their social and cultural backgrounds had not been a research recruitment criterion for the project, but one that we nevertheless were keen to explore as part of understanding their interest in enhancing their digital engagement. The training sessions were opened to all older adults wishing to develop their digital literacies and there was an underlying assumption that such an initiative would attract an older yet diverse audience. However, research participants' testimonies led us to speculate the opposite. Although participants from different nationalities and walks of life participated in the research, they had more in common than they first led us to believe. Our speculations were confirmed when we asked participants about their professional background, as a form of accessing their socio-cultural locations (Mannheim, 1927). It was then that we found out that their experiences were much more uniform than first anticipated. Although participants' professional careers were diverse in focus of practice, they were rather similar in status. All participants featured in the research had been involved in what Drucker (1953/2011) would have deemed 'knowledge work' (p. 122) during their professional careers, i.e., they had worked in professions whose main focus was the development of new knowledge and demanded intellectual work as opposed to manual work. The professional capacity of the individuals participating in the study spread from jobs in engineering to roles in management and teaching, with many holding vocational or higher education degrees. This alerted us to the fact that our cohort of research participants enjoyed a (privileged) socio-economic status and cultural background that allowed them to perceive the digital world from such a constructive point of view. Their approach to the web was also related to their own perception of wellbeing in the context of a connected society. For participants, the web represents a conduit to the contemporary world, a form of engagement with present-day practices and access to a vast sphere of knowledge. It is this realisation that the web allows them to be relevant in the current society and therefore enriches their inner world that impels participants to persevere beyond the obstacles that are imposed by a digital world in constant transformation.

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In the next section we will discuss aspects of the data presented in this section. We will make use of key literature to illuminate the findings herein presented.

Discussion of findings and concluding reflections

This paper aimed to access the reasons that drive research participants to invest in the development of their own digital practices and the difficulties they face in their journey to becoming digitally literate. For the purpose of this research we conceptualised digital literacies beyond the popular understanding of technical skills and competencies to develop an interpretative lens that encapsulated social and cultural practices as crucial components of what it means to be a proficient user in a world mediated by the web. The research was also informed by knowledge of the web as a digital phenomenon that affects individuals of all ages, thus stressing the need to move our understanding of digital practices beyond generational gaps. In this respect the seminal work of Mannheim (1953) on the 'Problem of Generations' is very pertinent and curiously current for this work, especially when it comes to the discussion of findings. Mannheim posited that the understanding of generations should extend beyond the existence of biological rhythms of human existence, in other words, their age, to include their social and historical location (ibid, p. 291), their interior experience of time – *innerer Erlebniszeit*, as well as the phenomenon of contemporaneity – *Gleichzeitigkeit* - that older adults share with other social groups. In Mannheim's view these are key indicators to understanding generational experiences. Important to highlight here then is Mannheim's qualitative concept of time (1927/2017, p. 86) in that individuals inhabit and experience a common world independently of their age. Such conception is critical to this study in that although we are dealing with a cohort of research participants that can be biologically traced back to a pre-digital era, their experience is also impacted by the social and cultural processes of their contemporary society. Such processes, in turn, allow them to be situated in a historical present that influences not only their practices, but also their identity. We can link this assertion to participants' commitments to developing a solid knowledge of the web and becoming digital literate. It could be argued that participants' resolution to engage with the digital is more than a way of keeping up with younger generations; it is first and foremost a form of (re)capturing their sense of belonging within

the complexities of a modern society. It is also their answer to the struggle of remaining relevant in face of innovations that are often associated with younger social groups, but which do not have to be exclusively related to such age cohorts. This then brings into question classifications of web users based on age. As this paper has shown, such categorisations are reductive and counterproductive when trying to problematize citizens' digital practices and needs in current times.

Research participants' engagement and identification with digital practices becomes a form of self-inclusion in a modern society and by default a strategy that brings them closer to the practices of other groups with whom they co-exist. The generational gap then is not so much one related to age, but to the knowledge and know-how individuals possess to actively participate and be part of the contemporary phenomenon the digital world has become. In this respect, the inner unity of a generation is better conceived through a prism of shared experience within a given moment. From this perspective, debates of digital literacy divides focused on age should be replaced by discussions of digital practices applied to the temporal, social and cultural contexts of individuals' backgrounds. Doing so would allow to account for the eclecticism of digital practices and their agents. What is important to understand here then is that each generation is characterised by a 'distinctive historical consciousness which leads them to experience and approach the same social and cultural phenomena differently' (Pilcher, 1994, p.489). In short, even though different age groups cannot escape their historical past, it does not mean they are restricted to it. The wish of research participants to become digital literate is an example of it. In other words, it is their lived experience within a given temporal frame (in our case, a contemporary society shaped by a digital culture) and not their age that better characterises the generation research participants are striving to belong to and identify with. Generational practices are therefore not static and must be interpreted within the spatio-temporal contexts in which they takes place.

In this vein, Mannheim (1952) reminds us that cultural creation and cultural accumulation are not necessarily reserved to the same group of individuals or strictly passed on from one generation to the other. Rather, culture is constantly evaluated and in continuous

development via interactions with what Mannheim names of 'fresh contacts'. The interaction of accumulated heritage with new realities 'plays an important part in the life of an individual when he[/she] is forced by events to leave his[/her] social group and enter a new one' (p. 293). 'Fresh contacts' thus represent a shift of social relations and a change of 'vital factors (the change from one generation to another)' (ibid, p. 294), which can lead to more radical transformations in which change is introduced by a new participant and/or a new activity. In the context of our study, we can say that the web and the practices therein developed are an example of interaction with fresh contacts. Fresh contacts can ultimately lead to the loss of some accumulated culture. Yet, they can also yield the creation of new attitudes and practices that are relevant to a contemporary world. The participants in this study currently live in between these two realities, that of accumulated and newly established culture, of analogue and digital practices. Although they cannot yet forget the former, they are already striving to embed themselves in the latter. In essence, in the context of this research, the emergence of the web as a new form of working, learning and socialising (JISC, 2014) has become a force of change that leads not only to a transformation of lived experiences, but also to a conscious adjustment of practices that can affect the individual in different ways. One example regarding this statement is the observation that research participants have grown to regard the web as a tool of socialisation that allows them to avoid psychological isolation. In so being, participants seem optimistic about the effects of their digital participation with regards to their well-being. This is reflected by the possibilities they have identified online for social connectivity and active participation beyond the restrictions of their physical space. Another example offered by this research is connected to the idea that, as the web enables new practices, old practices are relegated to a second plan. This is illustrated by participants' difficulty or unwillingness to imagine their lives without the influence of the web. Although they were born and have experienced life in a pre-digital world, they have started to incorporate digital practices in their lives in such ways that they have almost become irreversible. In this respect, Mannheim concludes that culture only 'exists in so far as it is produced and reproduced in the present, hence past experience is only relevant when it exists concretely incorporated in the present' (1952, pp. 294-95). It can thus be said that research participants are well ensconced to embrace a

digital culture as part of their practice and well on the way to become entrenched in the digital activities that epitomise the current knowledge work generation independently of their age group. Mannheim's work is again of relevance here in the sense that the understanding of generations can be demarcated by the 'socially constructed "we-feelings" that have immanent "entelechies"' (McCourt, 2011, p. 55) –as an expression of how one experiences life and the world - rather than by age. This is evident in the attitudes participants show towards their engagement online. They not only have realised the potential of the web, but they have also taken active steps to be part of it. Even though participants are aware of the limitations of their knowledge - when compared with younger groups of users - as well as of the risks associated with the web, their desire to develop digital literacies derives from their acknowledgement that the web is a tool and source of learning and socialisation valuable for the maintenance of their intellectual and active lives. In this sense, the potential the web represents for their wellbeing outweighs the risks associated with it and which can be alleviated through the development of digital literacies, i.e., informed practice.

In summary, this work points out that generational digital practices should not be understood solely from a prism of age. It also aims to start a debate on how the digital world affects the sense of identity of older adults, especially those who equate 'remaining relevant in a contemporary society' with the development of digital literacies. Digital engagement is – at least from the perspective of our research participants – connoted with an active form of citizenship, a strategy that helps participants remain meaningful in a contemporary world.

Thus, understandings of generational (digital) practices would be best developed in relation to different contextual factors – instead of restricted to age boundaries - that are important to the development and justification of one's sense of identity. With this paper, we have shown that a more thorough explanation of generational practice can be offered through a perspective of contemporaneity or *Gleichzeitigkeit* (Mannheim,) in which generations are understood to inhabit the same socio-cultural time qualitatively, if not quantitatively. Mannheim's work makes a critical contribution in this regard, particularly to debates of digital generation divides that have for more than two decades polarised

opinions not only within the academic community, but also amongst the public. It is high time we put this debate to rest so that we can focus on more important aspects that hinder or drive the digital practices of different user groups, amongst which are aspects of social class and gender, to mention only a few factors, that require further and sustained investigation.

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